



"letting Sand wait..."

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"letting Sand wait..."

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:55:25 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/f1881r47t>

letting Sand wait and driving on to catch up with Sweetie, Deek cut off his motor. July, his clerk and secretary, was not due until ten. There should be no occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time.

Anna Flood said, "See. Just look at him."

She was watching Deek's sedan circle the Oven and then cruise slowly past her store. "Why does he have to hover like that?"

Misner looked up from the wood stove. "He's just checking on things," he said, and went back to laying the fire. "Got a right, doesn't he? It's sort of his town, wouldn't you say? His and Steward's?"

"I would not. They may act like they own it, but they don't."

Misner liked a tight fire and the one he was preparing would be just that. "Well, they founded it didn't they?"

"Who you been talking to?" Anna left the window and walked to the back ^{leading her} ~~where~~ stairs led to an apartment ^{above}. There she slid a pan of sloppy meat leavings and cereal under the stairwell. The cat, turned viscious by motherhood, stared at her with warning eyes. "Fifteen families founded this town. Fifteen, not two, One was my

father, another my cousin--"

"You know what I mean," Misner interrupted her.

Anna peeped into the darkness trying to see into the box where the litter lay. "I do not."

"The money," said Misner. "The Morgan's had the money. I guess I should say they financed the town--not founded it."

The cat would not eat while ^{being} ~~Anna~~ watched ~~her~~, so Anna ^{forfeited a peep at the 16 Hens and} turned back to Richard Misner. "You wrong there, too. Everybody pitched in. The bank idea was just a way of doing it. Families bought shares in it, you know, instead of just making deposits they could run through any old time. This way their money was safe."

Misner nodded and wiped his hands. He didn't want another argument. Anna refused to understand the difference between investing and cooperating. Just as she refused to believe the woodstove gave more warmth than her little electric heater.

"The Morgans had the resources, that's all," she said. "From their father's bank back in Haven. My great uncle. We called him Big Daddy, but his real name was--"

"I know, I know. Rector. Rector Morgan ^{'s} ~~whose~~ bank failed, but he didn't."

"The bank had to close down--back in the thirties--but it didn't close out. I mean they had enough so we could start over. I know what you thinking, but you can't honestly say it didn't work. People prosper here. Everybody."

"Everybody's prospering on credit, Anna. That's not the same thing."

"So?"

"So what if the credit's gone?"

"It can't be gone. We own the bank, the bank doesn't own us."

"Aw, Anna. You don't get it, do you? You don't understand."

She liked his face even when he was talking nonsense. She had been about to sell out--the store, the apartment ^{above}, the car, everything and ^{go back} ~~return~~ to Detroit--when ^{Richard Misner} ~~he~~ came riding into town, alone, in a beat up ^{Ford} ~~truck~~. Calvary's new minister. Anna folded her arms on the wooden counter. "I own this store. My daddy died--it's mine. No rent. No mortgage. Just town fees. I buy things; I sell things; the mark-up is mine."

"You're lucky. What about the farms? Suppose a crop fails, say, two years in a row. Does old Mr. Sand get to take out his share? Borrow on it? Sell it to the bank? What?"

"I don't know what he does, but I do know it's no gain to the bank for him to lose it. So they'd give him money to buy more seed, gauano, whatever."

"You mean *lend* him the money."

"You making my head ache. Where you come from all that might be true. Ruby's different."

"Hope so."

"Is so. Any problem brewing sure ain't money."

"Well, what is it then?"

"Hard to figure, but I don't like the way Deek's face looks when he's checking the Oven. ^{He does it every day God sends.} More like hunting than checking. They're just kids."

"That fist painting scared a lot of peple."

"Why? It was a picture!" ^{You'd think somebody had burned across!} Annoyed, she started wiping things-- ^{Jars} shelves, case fronts, the soda pop cooler. "He should talk to the parents, not go hunting for the kids like he's a sheriff. Kids need more than what's here."

Misner couldn't agree more. Since the murder of Martin Luther, new committments had been sworn, ^{laws} legislation introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. ~~But~~ It was as

though something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost. That was what Destry, Roy, Caline and the rest were looking for. Maybe the fist painter was looking for it too. In any case, if they couldn't find the ticket, they might break in the pawn shop. Question was, who pawned it in the first place and why. "You told me that's why you left, but you never said why you came back."

Anna wasn't about to explain all of that, so she elaborated on what he already knew. "Yeah, that's why. I thought I was drying up like a shallow well and I don't regret it one bit--even though it didn't work out."

"Well, I'm glad it didn't, whatever the reason." He stroked her hand.

Anna returned his touch. "I'm worried," she said. "About Billie-Marie. We have to come up with something, Richard. Something more than choir competitions, and Bible class and ribbons for fat vegetables and ^{new} refrigerators and baby showers..."

"What about her?"

"What? Oh. She came in here a while back and I knew right away she had something on her mind, but the truck was late with my goods, so I was short with her."

"Which is to say what?"

"She's gone off. At least I think so. Nobody's seen her."

"What does her mother say?"

Anna shrugged. "Pat's hard to talk to. Kate asked her about Billie-Marie--hadn't seen her at practice. Know what she did? Answered Kate's^s question with another." Anna mimicked Pat Best's soft, cold voice. "'Why do you need to know that?' She and Kate are close, too."

"You think she's courting harm? She couldn't just disappear without anybody knowing where to."

"I don't know what I think."

"I'll talk to Roger. He should know; he's her grandfather."

"*You* ask him. Not me."

"Say, what is all this feeling about Roger? I've been here three years, almost, and I can't make out why folks freeze around him. Is it his mortuary business?"

"Probably. That and, well, he 'prepared,' if you get my meaning, his own wife."

"Oh."

"That's something to think about, aint it?"

"Still."

They were quiet for a moment--thinking about it. Then Anna walked around the counter and ^{stood at the window.} ~~looked outside the plate glass~~ window. "You know you right smart about weather. This is the third time I disbelieved you and was proved wrong."

Misner joined her. Just touching the pane they could tell the temperature had dropped suddenly into the teens.

"Go ahead. Light it," she said laughing and happy to be wrong if it made this man she adored right. There were women in church who disapproved of his obvious interest in her--her and nobody else. But Anna thought there was more to it than just their own plans for this widowed, handsome, intelligent man and their various daughters and neices. She was certain the disapproval was mostly because of her unstraightened hair. ^{Good hair} The conversations she had been forced to have when she came back from Detroit. Strange, silly, invasive probings. she felt as though they were questioning her pubic hair, underarm hair. And if ^{she} ~~the~~ had walked completely naked down the street they would have commented only on her hair. The subject summoned more passion, invited more opinions, solicited more anger than that prostitute Menus brought home from Tulsa. She probably would have

straightened it again, eventually--it wasn't a permanent change or a statement--except it clarified so much for her in the days when she was confused about so much else. Instantly she could identify friends and those who were not; recognize the well-brought-up, the ill-raised, the threatened, the insecure. Dovey Morgan liked it; Pat Best hated it; Deek and Steward shook their heads; Kate Golightly loved it and helped her keep it shaped; Revered Pulliam preached a whole sermon about it; K.D. laughed at it; most of the young people admired it, except Arnette. Like a geiger counter her hair registered, she believed, tranquility or the intensity of a rumbling, deep-down disorder.

(over) Anna
"Let me make some coffee," she said, eyeing the clouds above Holy Redeemer. "This might get serious."

old Ace Flood's faith had been the mountain-moving kind, so he built his store to last. Sandstone. Sturdier than some churches. Four rooms for his family above; below a spacious storeroom, a tiny bedroom, and a fifteen foot high selling room crammed with shelves, bins, cases and drawers. The windows were regular house type--he didn't want or need display; no big, wasteful "looking in" plate glass for him. Let folks come inside to see what he had. He didn't have

The fire, ~~so~~^{smelling} wonderful, and
attracted the mother cat, who curled
up behind ~~the stove~~^{the stove} & haunch remained to
her eyes, wide to
any predator - human or otherwise.

many things but he had a lot of it. ^{what he stocked} Before he died, he ^{watched} saw his store change from ^a necessary service to Ruby to a business patronized by ^{the} loyal friends for certain items, but who balked at his prices and more and more drove trucks to Demby for cheaper (and better) supplies. Anna changed all that. What Ace's Groc. now lacked in bulk products, it gained in variety and style. She offered free coffee on cold days, iced tea when it was hot. She put out two chairs and a small table for the elderly and those who drove in from farms and wanted to rest a while. And since adults never frequented the Oven next to the store--except for special events--she catered to the appetites of the young who liked to gather there. She sold her own pies, made her own candy along with the lots she picked up in Demby. She kept three kinds of soda pop instead of one. Sometimes she sold the black-as-eight-rock peppers the Convent grew--but they went so fast and getting out there wasn't always convenient.) ^{done} She kept hog's head cheese in the cooler as her father had ^{done} along with local butter and salted pork. But canned goods, dried beans, coffee, sugar, syrup, baking soda, flour, salt, catsup, paper products--all the items nobody could or wanted to make at home--took up the space Ace Flood once used for cloth, work shoes, light tools, kerosene. Now Sargeant's

Feed and Seed sold the shoes, the tools, the kerosene, and x's drugstore sold the needles, thread, counter medicine, prescriptions, sanitary napkins, stationery and tobacco. Except for Blue Boy. Steward had relied on Ace for that and wasn't about to change. *this habits*

In Anna's hands, Ace's Groc. blossomed on variety, comfort and flexibility. Because she let Menus cut hair in the back on Saturdays, incidental purchases rose. Because she had a nice toilet downstairs, casual users felt obliged to become customers before they left. Farming women came in for peppermint after church; the men for sacks of raisens. Invariably they picked up a little something more from the shelves. *(over)*

after a while A station wagon drove up and parked so close to the store, both Misner and Anna could see the fever in the baby's blue eyes. The *woman* mother held the child over her shoulder and stroked its hair. The driver, a city-dressed man in his forties, got out and pushed open Anna's door.

"How you all doing?"

"Fine and you?"

"Look like I'm lost. Been trying to find ¹⁸ ~~24~~ west for more'n an hour." He looked at Misner and grinned an apology for having violated

The contentment she ^{drew} felt
from Richard's fire ^{made her smile}
~~as if she could not help but~~
~~call the time pass.~~

Maybe but she couldn't be
a minister's wife. Never.

Could she? Well he
had not asked her
to be one - so
just enjoy the
stone heat, and
the shape of his

head.
And the ^{hidden presence} thought
of ~~men~~
Kittens

the male rule of never asking for directions. "Wife made me stop.

*Said she's
had it."*

~~Baby's a little off."~~

"It's a ways back the way you come from," said Misner, looking at the Arizona plates, "but I can tell you how to find it."

"'Preciate it. 'Preciate it" said the man. "Don't expect there's a doctor around here is there?"

"Not around these parts. You have to get to Demby for that."

"What's wrong with the baby?" Anna asked.

"Sort of pukey. Hot too. We're well supplied but no aspirin nor cough medicine. Can't think of every damn thing, can you? Jesus."

"Your baby coughing? I don't believe you need cough medicine," Anna squinted through the window. "Ask your wife to come in out the cold."

"Drugstore'll have aspirin," said Misner.

"I didn't see no drugstore. Where bouts is it?"

"You passed it, but it don't look like a drugstore--looks like a regular house."

"How am I going to find it then? Houses round here don't seem to have numbers."

"Tell me what all you want and I'll get it for you. Then tell your

wife to bring that baby inside." Misner reached for his coat.

"Just some aspirin and some cough medicine. 'Preciate it. I'll get my wife."

The blast from the open door rattled the coffee cups. The man got back in the station wagon; Misner took off in his ratty Ford. Anna thought about making some cinnamon toast. *Pumpkin bread stale now* Be nice if she had an over ripe banana--the baby looked constipated--mush it up with a little applebutter.

The man came back shaking his head. "I'll just keep the motor running. She says she'll stay put."

Anna nodded. "You got far to go?"

"Lubbock. Say, is that coffee hot?"

"Uh huh. How you like it?"

"Black and sweet."

He'd taken two sips when the car horn sounded. *Shit.* "Excuse me," he said. When he came back he bought peppermints, peanut butter, crackers and three Royal Crowns and took them to his wife before returning to finish his coffee.

"You better gas up when you get on 18. Blizzard's coming."

He laughed. "Blizzard? In Lubbock, Texas?"

again. "You ain't in Texas yet," said Anna.

Misner shouldered open the door with Steward close on his heels. "Here you go," ^{he} said Misner handing over the bottles. The man took them and rushed back out to the station wagon. Misner followed to give him directions.

"Who all is that?" asked Steward.

"Just some lost folks." Anna handed him a thirty-two ounce tin of Blue Boy.

"Lost folks or lost whites?"

"Oh, Steward, please."

"Big difference, Anna girl. Big. Right Reverend?" Misner was just stepping back in.

"They get lost like everybody else," said Anna.

"Born lost. Take over the world and still lost. Right Reverend?"

"God has one people, Steward. You know that." Misner rubbed his hands, then blew on them.

"Reverend," said Steward, "I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance."

Misner smiled and was about to answer when the man entered

again to pay Misner for the medicine.

"Blizzard's heading in." Steward took in the man's light clothing and thin shoes. "You might want to ride it out somewhere. Gas station on 18. Wouldn't go no further than that if I was you."

"I'll beat it. I'll gas up on 18 but we crossing ^{that} the state line today. Thank you ^{All. You been a big} for your help. 'Preciate it."

"They never listen," said Steward as the station wagon drove away. He had been pumping water, nailing down, forking alfalfa, and storing up since Wednesday. And was in town for tobacco, syrup and to pick up Dovey.

"Say, Steward," Misner said. "You seen Roger's grand daughter, Billie-Marie?"

"What should I see her for?"

"Anna says nobody has. Of course we haven't asked her mother."

^{ING} Steward picked up on the "we," ^{Gabe put a crisp five dollar bill on the table.} "You won't get nothing there," he said, thinking, no major loss if she did run off. "That reminds me, Deek told me he saw Sweetie this morning--just walking on down the road. No overcoat. Nothing."

"Sweetie?"

"Out of her house?" Anna stressed her disbelief.

"Down what road?" asked Misner.

→ "Not Sweetie."

"Deek swears it was her."

"Sard Misner."

"Must have been. I saw her too. Right ^{outside} by my house. I thought ^{ed} she was going to knock, but she turned around and head back toward Center. Look to me like she was going on home."

"Didn't. Deek said she was way past Sargeant's--marching out of town like a soldier."

"Didn't he stop her?"

Steward stared at Anna as though he couldn't believe her words.

"He was opening up the bank, girl."

Misner frowned; Anna cut off anything he might be about to say with "You all want some coffee? Maybe some pumpkin bread?"

Both men accepted.

"Somebody better speak to Jeff." It was Anna's voice but all three glanced at a wall of shelves beyond which was Fleetwood's Furniture and Appliance.

Despite the predictions--from Richard Misner's gaze, Steward Morgan's watchfulness--a tiny piece of the sky flashed a water-color palette: orange-peach, minty-green, seashore blue. The rest of the

sky, pewter, served to brighten this odd, sweet sunbreak. It lasted a full hour, and delighted everybody who saw it. Then it faded and full minute before the lead solidified over a relentless wind. The first snow ^{came} ^a ^{sky} ^{By} ^{NOON} was stinging pellets, popping, not melting, before the wind. The second snow, two hours later, didn't pop. It lay down quietly and covered everything there was.

Sweetie had said, "Be back directly, Miss Mable." "Won't be gone but a minute, Miss Mable."

Meant to say it. Maybe she did say it. Anyway it was in her head to say. But she had to hurry quick before one of them gurgled.

On the porch, the sidewalk, Sweetie's stride was purposeful--as though there were somewhere important she had to be. Something important she had to do and it would take just a few minutes and she would be right back. In time to massage a little bottom to keep the sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing but mostly to watch. To never take her eyes off unless her mother-in-law was there, and to watch, then, as well because Miss Mable's eyes weren't as sharp as they once had been. Others offered help repeatedly at